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IN MEMORY
OF
MARTIN BRIMMER

*A Sermon Preached in
Trinity Church
in the
City of Boston
Sunday, January 26, 1896
by
Rev. E. Winchester Donald*

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exhibitions of a commanding personality are surest to win homage and attention. Carlyle's heroes are Cromwell, Napoleon, Mohammed, Frederick the Great, and, with these for divinities, he succeeds in making out a good case for hero-worship, and in securing for himself the title of the great apostle of the idolatry of force. Perhaps there is something in us all which responds to the display of those qualities of size, strength, daring, ingenuity in overcoming difficulties, which, from the beginning, have made periods in human history, tremendous, awful, revolutionary. The furious storm that followed the long, serene sunshines of September, which rent the forest and strewed the beach, is more memorable than the whole autumn's golden weather.

That is the charge which is urged against us to day. We cannot deny that there is a good deal of evidence to support that charge, —evidence which it would be idle to ignore. And yet I think the charge is not wholly, or even mainly, true. I should like to present this morning the other side, to show that there resides in modern civilization a beautiful responsiveness to the greatness which

our text declares is the utterance in man of the gentleness of God.

I should not be surprised if the strongest instinctive objection to gentleness as one of the most precious elements of greatness is its identification with feebleness. The moment you call a man gentle, some one is sure to cry, "Ah, yes! but his gentleness is only another name for a weak timidity, which holds him back from courageous deeds and bold speech. His character is very lovely and fits in well with the decorative and pacific aspects of life; but we miss the virility of mind, the vigour of will, which intrepidly conquer opposition, which masterfully win causes, and which gather all daring spirits to marshal them for a genuine battle fought under fearless leadership." And so gentleness is, if not despised, at least reckoned a weakly virtue, and the saying, "As gentle as a woman," passes into proverb. But this is to miss the true meaning of gentleness, to ignore the very quality which makes the gentle man a great man. You cannot call the butterfly, or the humming bird, gentle. That would be unmeaning, for gentleness implies force held in a fine control, force transmitted into ten-

derness, and lending itself to the tiny touch of a child. The horse is gentle, but only because "his neck is clothed with thunder," and "the glory of his nostrils is terrible." The poor out-worked hack, with scarce vigour enough to move, is not gentle; it is the magnificent beast whose loins and legs attest a strength that is invincible, and yet answers to the slightest drawing of the rein. The wind that fans the sufferer's cheek is gentle, only because it is capable of swelling to the tempest which wrecks the fields and sinks the ship. Gentleness without strength is feebleness, crying to the strong for pity, not admiration. Only God is perfectly gentle because only God is perfectly strong. The Maker of the torrent, the Creator of the earthquake, alone can make the daisy to spring from beneath the grass to clothe it with beauty. The more force one possesses, the more gentle he may become. The more strength one is capable of putting forth, the greater may be the tenderness which he can safely allow himself to show. It was of this the singer was thinking when he sang "Thy gentleness hath made me great." Let it be clear, then, that gentleness so far from being,

or indicating feebleness, is the splendid quality of the really strong. Let it be clear, also, that if anywhere gentleness has made itself felt as beneficent, there has always been behind it real power.

But if this be true, why is it that so few strong men dare to be gentle? Why is it they so valiantly put forth their utmost strength, hurling it against the barriers that obstruct their way, breaking what does not instantly bend, crushing what will not at the first command retire? In that fashion many men win their victories; but such victories are too often so costly that what is won is less valuable than the destruction of that by which the victory came. The manner of the battle elicits a savagery at last blind to many precious advantages, elicits its resentments that never die away, envies and jealousies which make themselves felt even at the moment when the celebration of the victory is at its height. Men of force are peculiarly tempted to believe that patience is pusillanimity, that courtesy is the beginning of a weak concession, and that a conciliatory spirit is confession of the weakness or hopelessness of one's cause. Hence

the forceful man is too frequently on his guard against the temptation to be gentle, in the belief that he may weaken his position and lose his chance to crush, by one stunning blow of argument or sword, the opposition just ready to yield. It seems incredible to him that his force may be multiplied by patience and courtesy and conciliation. These are to his thinking the qualities of the timid and the weak. He cannot quite believe that anything which resists violence can yield to gentleness. That the cloak, which the traveller wrapped the closer about him the fiercer blew the wind, should be cast aside under the genial heat of the sun is unthinkable to him. And yet in the community, men of gentleness are conquering the men of naked force. With infinite patience, with a beautiful courtesy, and with a conciliation born of the consciousness of reserved strength, they wait until heat and noise are passed, until silence has earned the right to speak, and then win over to the cause of justice, wisdom, beauty, those whose vigorous oppositions had threatened to defeat what all had at heart. So gentleness shows its greatness, its large-hearted


and clear-headed devotion to truth, its profound conviction that courtesy is as fine a weapon as was ever forged, its serene trust that, if silence can for a space be made, reason and lofty sentiment will bring in what cold logic and unquestioned fact, urged with never so mighty power, only succeeded in keeping out. I think that any one of us who has ever sat in a deliberative body, or in a governing board, or on a managing committee, will be prompt to own that often the passage of our best measures, the adoption of wisest policies and most beneficent plans, are due not to men whose great force of speech we most admire, but to the men whose strength clothed itself in a gentleness that was too persuasive to be resisted. "Do not arm truth, make her lovely," is Emerson's sagacious advice. But only they who have thoroughly possessed themselves of truth, who have rationally convinced themselves that she is truth, dare make her lovely with the loveliness of gentleness, and meet their fellows with the smile of victory upon their lips. These are the men who know the meaning of our text to-day. These are the men, too, whom after all we honour,

and, what is more, the men we love. If it be true that we worship force, it is none the less true that it secures our finest homage when it is clothed in the gentleness which wins our grateful love.

But it is time to assert that no gentleness is safe which is not born of God. Without Him for inspiration and Him for guide, gentleness soon degenerates into low cunning or clever craft. Without a deep belief in a God of love, Who can love because He is omnipotent, courtesy becomes a mask behind which the cruel lips curl with sneers for the trust that can be so easily duped, for the confidence that can be so quickly cheated. Conciliation becomes the contemptible suavity of the cross-examiner, eager not for truth and fact, but bent on beguiling the witness into self contradiction. Only when a man has so trusted God, so given up his life into the Divine keeping, that he dares to imitate God, does his gentleness reach its height of greatness,—for only so can the gentle man guard himself from the temptation to sink to the miserable level of dishonest diplomacy, the wiliness of crafty cunning. The “man of God” alone can safely be the

“man of the world.” The man of God ought to be a man of the world; the man of the world ought to be a man of God. Only so is godliness human; only so is worldliness safe. Once more force is at its best when it is gentle, in the field of ethical enterprise. We like to hear modern life lashed, and see it scorched, for its municipal vices and its personal sins. The splendid denouncer, whose stinging epigrams make the wicked flinch, whose bold, unqualified charges look wholly true to the multitude, seldom fails to secure attention and applause. Men think he is bringing in the Kingdom of Heaven; that the hosts of sin are on the eve of a disastrous rout. The more, and more ferociously, he denounces, the surer and nearer seems the day of municipal and private salvation. Yet all through history the part played by mere denunciation is pitifully small. Anybody can set fire to this church; only a genius could build it. The constructive work of humanity in the field of ethical endeavour is the only work of its kind which lasts, and they who build are our benefactors. In the long run we are interested ethically, only in those men who have brought into society the in-

stitutions and influences which bless us in all noble ways. The ultimate question is not how much wickedness has been unmasked, but how much goodness has been cared for, given chances, instruments, rewards, and encouragement. The foundation of the Wells Memorial in Boston is a fact of greater significance and of more lasting good, than the exposure and conviction of Jacob Sharp in New York. To prove a man bad is not so praiseworthy, or so splendid a feat of force, as to make him good. All through life runs this profound principle. The denouncers may be necessary, although we ought to remember that to rebuke is not to denounce, to warn is not to vilify—but without those constructive spirits, the aim and passion of whose lives is to create conditions under which righteousness seems worth trying for, society would be no better than anarchy. More than this: the denouncer soon grows hopeless, since the more he denounces the more there is to denounce,—soon becomes discredited, since men early weary of the man who has no remedy for the ills he pictures; but the man who, by gentleness and faith in God, seeks to bring in, and get a



welcome for, the conditions under which good impulses are encouraged and directed is never hopeless, for he sees that only by a large patience, and by courage in the face of defeat, is the business of bettering the world successfully carried on. And he is never discredited, for no man who brought into society, through his life or through his plans, an influence that makes for peace and righteousness was ever rejected of the people, unless, first of all, their minds were poisoned by politicians or priests. No! our loudest reformers are by no means they who stem our tides of evil, much less open to us the gates of righteousness. For, after all, they upon whom we depend for the continued and increasing power of integrity and honour and justice and compassion are to-day, as they have always been, the strong, steadfast, gentle souls who have made goodness look lovely in our eyes—the men whose characters have made bad men ashamed, and good men feel the firmness of the moral ground beneath their feet. They have been gentle in their judgments, because behind the judgment lived a fine scorn of meanness and dishonour and fraud. They have been

courteous in their attitudes towards men they could not and did not respect, because through the forms of courtesy shone the white light of a soul that hated all that is low and impure. They have not stormed nor fumed in the presence of evil, because they were sure that the majesty and beauty of a righteous life blasts so much of wickedness as their lives could touch, more terribly than the scorching flow of angry denunciation. Ah! what a revelation it is, suddenly to perceive what a power among us, and over us, is personal moral force clothed in the gentleness which had perhaps led us thoughtlessly to fancy it was not force at all. When its visible presence is withdrawn, the community thoroughly learns that ethical integrity is never so dynamic as when its very gentleness gives it sway. Men whom fierce denunciation would have driven into a more reckless rebellion against the laws of moral behaviour, have silently yielded to the gentle, inarticulate, pleadings of the noble, stainless life. That God's gentleness makes our men of force great, is illustrated in every generation; and so every generation has its saints and conquerors of evil.

And, finally, it is significant that they who do much to rob life of its harshest features, by giving it a chance to acquaint itself with beauty and refinement, are those who unite strength and gentleness. It is a commonplace, I suppose, to say that God is a great artist. At any rate, it is impossible to reflect even in a superficial way, upon the marvellous beauty of the world, without instantly believing that it all has an intended ministry to man. I know that the scientist is finding pragmatic reasons for much brilliancy of colour in nature, for much that is exquisite in form. And yet after he has proved to us the utilitarian function of the blue and gold and violet that flood the heavens, the optic necessity of the living green in which the fields and trees are clothed, we feel that an omnipotent God might so have fashioned and ordered His world that beauty could have been left out, and still all the utilitarian processes of nature go on. But beauty has not been left out. It is everywhere, and man, made in the image of God, is forever increasing it, consciously or unconsciously imitating the Creator. Of the ministry of this beauty I may not speak; but I think that

almost all of us are convinced that life without it would be a far less rich possession than it is to-day, because a splendid chamber would close its doors upon the soul forever. Beauty has so often lifted us up from the gray fields on which we toil, and carried us to the hills from whence we have seen a new heaven and a new earth, palpitating in an atmosphere of glory, that for most of us beauty is one of the "necessaries of life." It is both refuge and inspiration. But only the strong, gentle souls perceive this truth, or at least are capable of stating it for us. The man of sheer strength values beauty simply because of its power to give sensations, irrespective of what those sensations produce in personal or social character, just as other strong men delight in war irrespective of what war shall secure in the way of a righteous peace. But the strong, gentle, spirits, cherishing beauty because it is one of the soul's refuges from its dull routine and heavy sorrows, one of its mighty inspirations in the doing of its tasks, and, above all, as a power of refinement and purity, feel the burdens of the multitude's poverty in the things of artistic glory. To give the multitude the

right to enjoy what they may never have the right to possess, becomes a purpose just as strong as that of other men to give the multitude the Hospital or the Home. But it is a purpose which only they cherish who have profoundly felt in their own souls the refining, uplifting, inspiring power of beauty. For them beauty has silenced the harsh, discordant, strident notes of life, has melted out much of its bitterness and unrest, has revealed the excellence of gentleness as a power of life. God has led them into serenity of struggle, into placidity of utterance and endeavour, into the quietness of strength. And from them, most largely and most discriminatingly, have come the ample provision for the education of the people in the things of beauty, which make half the joy of living for thousands upon thousands in our cities. Their contribution to the beneficence of life, to the consolation and inspiration of life, is grand and substantial. But their force was first chastened into gentleness. Had they been men of force alone, we might still hunger for the joy and help of that beauty which is now before our eyes. I know that too often this sort of service is

not counted in as service to humanity's exigent needs; that it is still by all too many regarded as a mistaken and pleasant substitute for the service which pleads from the platform, which builds the public bath, or organizes and maintains a score of agencies to help, heal, and cheer the multitudes. But slowly we are coming, I think, to see that they who have striven to make life more beautiful, to furnish a refuge from its spiritual hopelessness, and to open doors to every latent wish to commune with what refines and chastens, are the benefactors of humanity equally with those who have builded Schools and Hospitals, or have given their lives to strenuous championship of a noble cause. And the more clearly we see that, the more intelligent and acute will be our gratitude for the work of the men whose gentleness fitted them for the special work of giving us the influence and discipline of beauty. For they have helped us to understand God, and to understand life.

For every man whom the gentleness of God has made great,—great in influence, great in special and inspiring achievements, we, who have been accused of worshipping force and

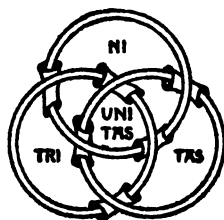
the men of vehemence are profoundly, intelligently, lastingly grateful.

Parishioners of Trinity Church, citizens of Boston, surely you have been thinking as you have listened, even as I was thinking while I wrote, of one who, to this Church and to this city, has displayed the greatness of his gentleness as have few men who have ever worshipped in this venerable parish and lived within this ancient town. With you I join in thanking God for the good example of that gentle spirit, that strong character, that noble unselfishness, that rare refinement, which, for three score and six years, shone undimmed in the life of God's soldier, servant, saint,—Martin Brimmer.

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